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Series S - Rural Sociology

AGE RELATES POSITIVELY TO COMMUNITY SATISFACTION:
SOME EXPLANATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS*

by

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October 1981

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ABSTRACT

Community satisfaction surveys are commonly used by community development practitioners in program planning. Isolating resident characteristics which affect reports of community satisfaction can provide practitioners with a clearer picture of community needs. In this paper, we present a case in which age was isolated as a highly significant factor affecting reported community satisfaction. We explain the findings as the result of four factors: (1) selective migration, (2) influence of length of residence, (3) acceptance of one's surroundings as one ages, and, (4) rising expectations among the younger generation. In light of these findings we suggest that practitioners target their surveys and programs to appropriate age groups within the community.

AGE RELATES POSITIVELY TO COMMUNITY SATISFACTION: SOME EXPLANATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Community evaluation and satisfaction studies have become an accepted part of community development efforts. They are a means to collect subjective information and they can also serve as a means of creating awareness and encouraging participation. The evidence suggests that development policies have often failed when they have not incorporated information on how community members perceive their circumstances. Development strategies, as well as various approaches to impact assessment, have called for subjective, in addition to objective, criteria for measuring community needs (Goudy and Wepprecht, 1977; Rojek et al., 1975).

A difficulty in using subjective tests arises in isolating individual and community characteristics which influence residents' reported levels of community satisfaction. Subjective assessments are affected by matters other than the characteristics of the object or issues that are being assessed. For example it has been found that income, age, years of education, and length of residence sometimes are related to residents' perceived satisfaction with the community or with services. While these individual characteristics have been isolated in several studies, not all researchers agree that all of these factors have a significant predictable impact on residents' levels of community satisfaction (Glasgow, in progress).

In this paper, we will illustrate a case in which age was found to be a highly significant factor affecting the level of individuals' reported community satisfaction. It is not our objective to explain in some statistical form what all contributing variables are for explaining community satisfaction. We hope to demonstrate the importance to community development practitioners and researchers of incorporating life-cycle or age analyses in their program development and evaluation research.

DATE SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were gathered in Central Illinois in a rural county with a population of slightly over 30,000 people just over half of whom live in the county seat. Two distinct schedules were administered, one to a total population of 324 graduating high school seniors, and the other to 340 adults. The students were surveyed at school.

A sample of 700 adults was originally selected through a random selection process. In Mount Pulaski and Lincoln, phone books were used for the selection process. The County Directory provided residents' names for the other parts of the County. The sample was chosen to provide proportional representation of each township within the County, the larger a township's population, the more respondents were chosen from that township.

The selected respondents were contacted at home by Logan County residents who volunteered to distribute the surveys. Those volunteers then collected the completed questionnaires at a later time.

During the process of administering the survey several problems were encountered which substantially decreased the final sample size. Some respondents were not contacted. Thirty completed questionnaires were destroyed by fire. Mediocre response rate accounts for the further dwindling down of the sample size. The resultant sample is comprised of 340 adults. Rural respondents were over sampled while the "urban respondents" were under sampled. Approximately two thirds of the respondents were male. The median level of education among the adult respondents is completion of high school.

Both the students and the adults were asked to respond to 24 items regarding both the provision of services and the social forces in the community. These items were identically posed to each of the respondent groups. In addition, information was obtained from the students on jobs and economy, the location of recreational

activities, and future plans; the adults answered additional questions on jobs, the local economy, shopping behavior, and personal background. In writing the interview schedules, we used survey questions used by Goudy and Lichter (1977) and others.

THE FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the responses of both the high school seniors and the adults to the 24 measures of community satisfaction. The respondents were divided into four age categories for the purpose of this analysis. The numbers in Table 1 represent the percentage of respondents with an opinion who agree with the given statement. The findings are displayed graphically in Figure I. As is indicated in Figure I, for 19 of these 24 items, the responses indicate a positive relationship between age and level of community satisfaction. For items "a" through "j" there is an increase at each age level in the percentage of those who agree with positive statements about services or social interaction in the county. For one item in Figure I, (item "s") "the county needs new development programs", the relationship appears reversed; this statement, however, still indicates less community satisfaction among the younger respondents, who see a strong need for community development programs.

For another eight of the items in Figure I (items "k" - "r"), there is a generally positive relationship of age to expressed satisfaction, but with minor fluctuations. For five of these measures the fluctuation occurs between the two youngest age categories, those persons aged 18 and those aged 19-34. For all of these measures, however, the fluctuation is so slight as to be relatively immaterial.

For only 4 of the 24 items in Table 1 was there no relationship of age to response. Finally, for one item: "the county provides enough housing for the elderly," there is a negative relationship of age to response; the older the respondent the less likely he or she is to agree that provision of housing for the elderly is adequate.

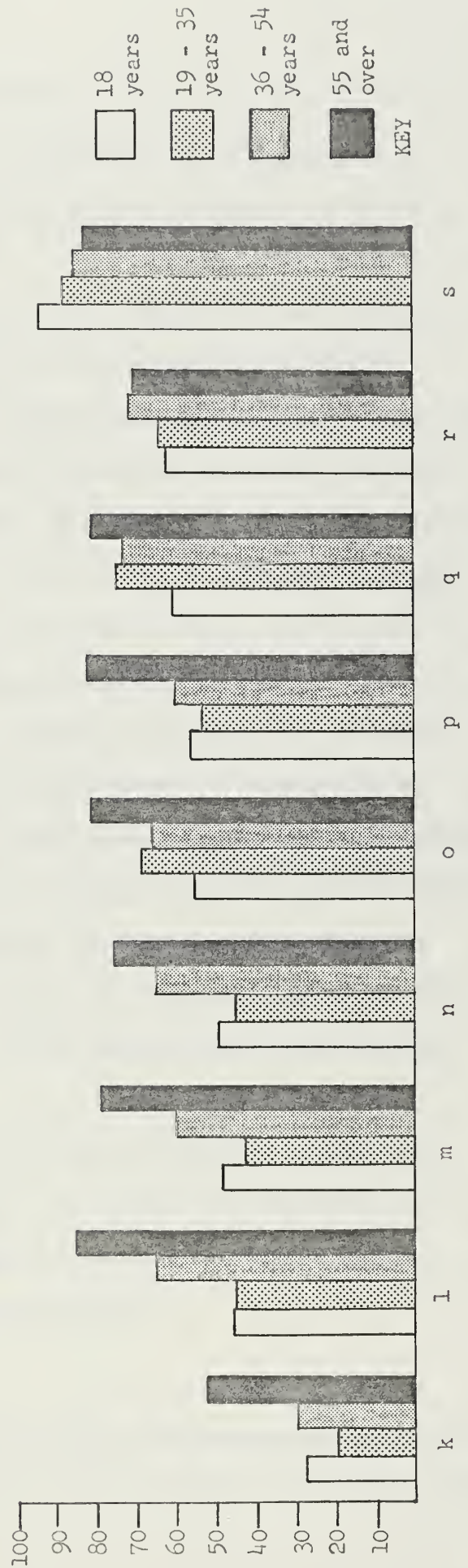
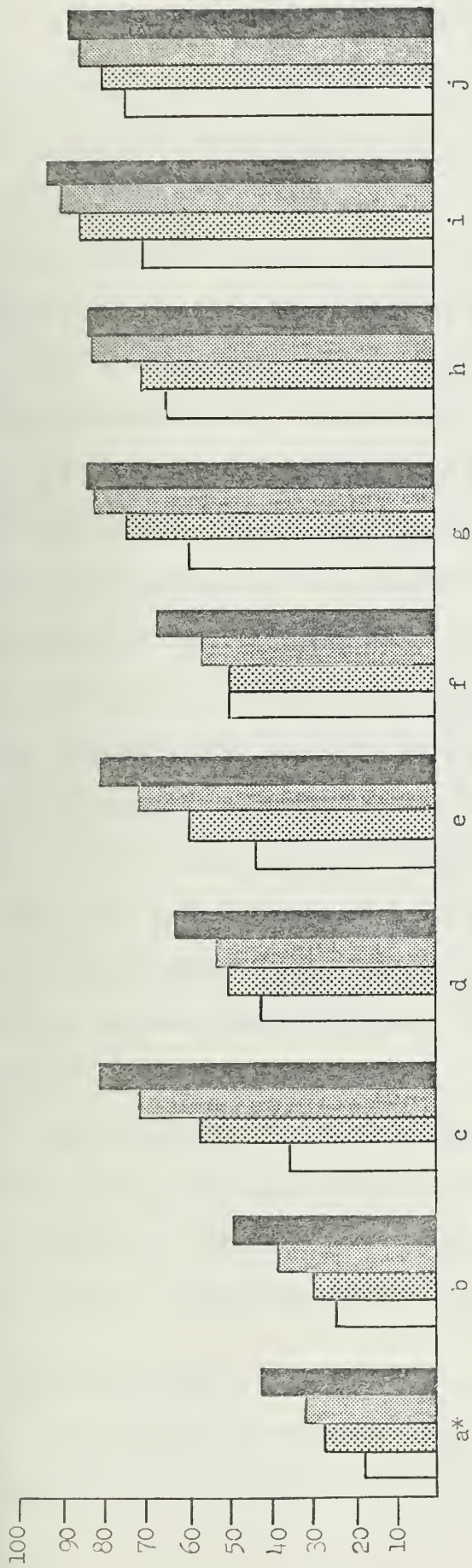
PERCENT WHO AGREE (OF THOSE WITH AN OPINION)

| STATEMENT | STUDENTS 18 yrs. | ADULTS | | |
|---|---------------------|--------|-------|-----------|
| | | 19-35 | 36-54 | 55 & over |
| a. Young residents want to stay in the county after completing their education. | 18.4 | 27.0 | 31.9 | 42.0 |
| b. The county provides good counseling programs for the youth in trouble. | 25.0 | 30.6 | 37.9 | 49.1 |
| c. The county provides a good local radio station. | 35.1 | 57.0 | 71.6 | 81.9 |
| d. The county provides good full-time job opportunities. | 41.7 | 50.7 | 53.0 | 63.0 |
| e. The county provides good opportunity for involvement in local government. | 43.8 | 59.3 | 71.4 | 80.3 |
| f. The county provides good recreational activities for the elderly. | 50.0 | 50.0 | 56.0 | 66.2 |
| g. Residents are willing to work together to get things done. | 59.6 | 73.5 | 82.9 | 84.9 |
| h. The county provides good welfare programs for those in need. | 64.1 | 70.5 | 83.5 | 84.3 |
| i. The county provides a good variety of clubs and organizations to join. | 69.6 | 85.7 | 90.1 | 93.0 |
| j. The county provides good educational opportunities for adults | 74.0 | 79.7 | 86.5 | 88.2 |
| k. County leaders are willing to provide economic support. | 28.0 | 19.2 | 30.2 | 53.2 |

TABLE I (cont')

| STATEMENT | STUDENTS 18 yrs. | ADULTS | | |
|--|---------------------|--------|-------|-----------|
| | | 19-35 | 36-54 | 55 & over |
| l. The county has good leaders. | 46.8 | 45.7 | 65.6 | 85.9 |
| m. The county provides good cultural opportunities. | 48.8 | 42.7 | 59.5 | 78.9 |
| n. The county provides a good local newspaper. | 49.0 | 45.6 | 65.4 | 75.8 |
| o. The county provides good local government. | 55.6 | 68.4 | 66.3 | 81.6 |
| p. The future of the county looks bright. | 56.8 | 53.4 | 60.9 | 82.9 |
| q. The county provides good police protection. | 60.9 | 75.4 | 73.1 | 81.5 |
| r. The county provides enough suitable housing to rent. | 62.0 | 64.4 | 71.1 | 70.5 |
| s. The county needs new community development programs. | 94.2 | 88.1 | 85.7 | 82.9 |
| t. The county provides good part-time job opportunities. | 72.4 | 61.5 | 55.3 | 75.8 |
| u. The county provides good services for the elderly. | 78.7 | 79.2 | 79.6 | 78.3 |
| v. The county provides good health care. | 83.0 | 69.3 | 75.5 | 77.2 |
| w. The county provides good educational opportunities for youth. | 88.1 | 89.2 | 86.2 | 90.1 |
| x. The county provides enough suitable housing for the elderly. | 73.2 | 72.3 | 64.8 | 59.0 |

Figure 1. Relationship of age to community satisfaction for selected items.



*The items in this figure correspond to the items in Table 1.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

The positive relationship of age to community satisfaction is apparent in a full 75 percent of the measures appearing on the questionnaire schedules, an unlikely chance occurrence.

As indicated previously, researchers have found other variables to be related to reported satisfaction. Given the nature of our data we investigated the extent to which our findings on age were related to other variables and were possibly a function of the presence of sex, income or residence differences among the different age groups. The high school seniors posed a special problem since they clearly have not yet entered the labor market. But the differences in our data do not indicate a teenagers versus adults differentiation, but a general increase in satisfaction by age. We focused our attention thus especially on the adult sample, trying to verify the teenager data when appropriate. We specifically checked for the differences between men and women, county seat residents and rural residents, and educational levels. In each case we found that within subcategories the relationships between age and expressed satisfaction held, although these controls did reduce the number of items for which the relationship existed. For example, when we looked at men and women separately we found that the relationship between age and satisfaction still held for 12 of 24 items among the men, and 16 of 24 items among the women. The results for the other controls were the same or better.

What may account for these findings? We attribute the findings to a number of factors which are probably operating simultaneously: (a) selective migration, (b) the influence of length of residence, (c) acceptance of one's surroundings as one ages, and (d) rising expectations among the younger generation.

SELECTIVE MIGRATION

The first factor, selective migration, postulates that those who were significantly dissatisfied with the quality of life in the community will have left. In keeping with

this hypothesis, the relatively high dissatisfaction among students may be attributable to their previous relative immobility: most high school seniors do not make location choices independent of their families. Upon graduating from high school, however, teenagers become more mobile: close to 45 percent of the student respondents indicated that they did plan to move out of the county within a year from the time they were surveyed. This includes high school students who plan to go to college outside the county as well as those who plan to find employment elsewhere. Further analysis indicates that among those leaving the county for work or education, a large number do not plan to return, including about 25 percent who indicate they do not wish to return to the county in the future.

LENGTH OF RESIDENCE

In this county, characterized by population decline, we find that only 12 percent of the adults have lived in the county less than 10 years. The median length of residence in the county among the adults is 36 years! Selective outmigration of dissatisfied citizens, plus a lack of newcomers, may account for the higher levels of satisfaction with community services and experience among the older population.

Length of residence has been found to be positively related to community satisfaction (Goudy, 1977; Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974; Marans and Rodgers, 1975; Rojek et al., 1975). It is assumed that an individual's social anchorage in the community increases with increasing duration of residence (Speare, 1974). In the model of community attachment proposed and tested by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), it was found that when length of residence in the community increases, one's ties to the community become stronger, which expresses itself in a generally more positive attitude to other aspects of the community.

ACCEPTANCE OF ONE'S SURROUNDINGS AS ONE AGES

There is also evidence that older community residents are more inclined to be satisfied with what is available to them. During the course of their lifetime residents

may scale down their expectations, accommodate to what is available, or reject the "cost" of bringing about change. Day, et al., (1980) express this as follows:

One explanation for this increased satisfaction (by age) with life situations is an accommodation with situations and things as they become more familiar. That is, as one grows older, one settles into certain patterns which "work" given the other alternatives that are open for choice. In other words, satisfaction seems to increase with adaption to a situation and recognition that certain expectations of youth were unrealistic, unattainable, or, in retrospect, not worth attaining anyway. One becomes, in a sense, "satisfied" because expectations have been adjusted to fit the reality of one's situation.

RISING EXPECTATIONS AMONG THE YOUNG

Finally, there is the possibility that the increasing satisfaction is not due to individual differences such as dissatisfied residents moving out or people adjusting their expectations as they grow older, but reflects generational (or cohort) differences: a case of rising expectations among the young. The older age group in our study started their adult lives before the end of World War. II and they have experienced tremendous changes in the world around them; consequently their evaluation of current conditions is greatly colored by "the long way we have come". Successive age groups tend to take the preceeding accomplishments for granted and they evaluate their communities in terms of rate of change and discrepancies which they perceive - accurately or not - to exist in the "quality" of the community and that of other communities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CD PRACTITIONERS

What are the implications of this relationship between age and measurement of satisfaction? Should the practitioner be concerned with this relationship and if so, with regard to which program development or evaluation tasks?

BIASED SURVEYS

An initial concern needs to deal with the procedures for collecting and using such data. The findings make it clear that the sampling framework becomes extremely important. Samples with heavy biases toward young or old people will not provide accurate aggregate information on the community. And young adults or older people may be easily under-represented in certain research procedures. For example, using school children as a vehicle for distributing and collecting data, will lead almost certainly to under-representation of the older population. Using meeting attendance for the collection of data will easily leave out many of the elderly. On the other hand, the younger population tends to be mobile and busy. It is more difficult to find them at home, to reach them through churches, or to get them to respond to newspaper questionnaires.

USING AGGREGATE COMMUNITY RESPONSES

A related question is the utility of "community" responses. Aggregate data such as the mean or median may be misleading in the sense that they obscure the differences which exist within a community. For program planning it may be close to useless to know that average satisfaction with opportunities for involvement in local government is around 60 percent, when for young adults this is about 40 percent and for the oldest adults the level of satisfaction is over 80 percent as indicated in Table 1, item "e".

TARGETED SURVEYS

The best response to the concerns cited above may well be to think in terms of "targeting". The community development effort should carefully assess what segment of the population should be the primary target for a program. If jobs and outmigration are the issue, then the younger population should be involved in the program and its supporting research. If real estate taxes are the area of concern, maybe every adult should potentially be involved in program and research, but the elderly certainly should be included. If services for the elderly are the program objective then target

the population accordingly.

There are positive aspects to surveying an entire community: it provides a vehicle for information and involvement. It can also save one from surprises: pockets of resistance to specific developmental efforts may be identified, as well as certain unanticipated resources and needs. Administratively, one survey is easier to handle than many targeted ones. However, this does not mean that the data always need to be summarized and interpreted on an aggregate basis, or that everyone's opinion on every issue should be treated the same way. Data could be reported and interpreted only for the groups most affected. It will involve judgments but it may be more useful to program planning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CD RESEARCH

Finally, these data raise questions about the utility of subjective tests in research on community satisfaction. For example, Day and colleagues (Day et al., 1980), referring to the tendency of older people to report higher satisfaction, make the remarkable observation that "reported satisfaction may not necessarily indicate an absence of need". Folk wisdom, on the other hand, tells us that the young will always be restive and dissatisfied regardless of what actual community conditions are. Both lines of thought assert that subjective measures may not be valid statements on conditions and needs. But to discount subjective measures in this manner would be to risk the development of programs divorced from residents' stated preferences; this could result in resident resistance to policy implementation. Furthermore, given the effort expended thus far in collecting subjective data and the credibility given to the process, it would be unwise to simply dismiss them as irrelevant. There is, then, cause to take stock; if subjective data are to play a truly effective role in program planning and development, we will need to gain a better understanding of data characteristics such as the remarkable relationship illustrated here between age and reported satisfaction.

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